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PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #1150/01 1741431
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231431Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1799
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0252
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 4874

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001150

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/19/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF MOPS KBTS RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: UPDATE ON THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN GALI

REF: TBILISI 322

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) Summary. There are conflicting reports on the extent of humanitarian-related problems in Gali among UNOMIG officials, NGOs in Zugdidi and Sukhumi, the Abkhazia Government in-exile and Abkhaz de facto authorities. The main issues affecting Georgian residents in Gali today include the lack of rehabilitation of infrastructure and impediments to crossing the administrative boundary. There is disagreement among the various groups about whether teachers in Gali are prohibited from teaching in the Georgian language, but currently the main point of contention in schools is the study of Georgian history and geography. The process of obtaining travel documents poses a continuing challenge to Georgian residents. According to our interlocutors, crime seems to be decreasing in Gali, perhaps due to the arrival of Russian border guards. On Poloff's recent trip to western Georgia including Sukhumi, NGOs and UNOMIG officials did not focus on the situation in Gali as much as they have in the past. However, with the departure of UNOMIG, the international community will need to maintain its focus on Gali to ensure that the situation there does not deteriorate further. End summary.

REHABILITATION IN ABKHAZIA EXCLUDES GALI

¶2. (C) UNOMIG military monitoring officers (MMOs) in Zugdidi and Sukhumi told Poloff on a recent trip to those cities that Georgians in Gali continue to experience harassment and general neglect by the de facto Abkhaz authorities. The Head of Representation of Abkhazia Government in-exile in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti District, Paata Shamguia, stated that the Abkhaz and Russians are notably excluding the Gali region from rehabilitation efforts in Abkhazia. MMOs specifically noted as an example the M27 road, which runs from Gali to Sukhumi. Despite assurances from the de facto authorities that they plan to improve the M27 in Gali, so far reconstruction on the road is occurring everywhere but Gali. MMOs said that as soon as they enter Ochamchire region they notice a significant improvement in the road.

IMPEDIMENTS TO CROSSING THE BOUNDARY

¶3. (C) Georgians face obstacles crossing the administrative boundary line. In one example relayed by Zugdidi-based MMOs, a medevac convoy in June from Gali was initially denied permission to cross the boundary. Despite an obvious emergency situation, it took 30 minutes for the medevac to obtain permission to cross. While rumors persist that the Enguri crossing has been shut down, MMOs reported that, in reality, the Russian guards are enforcing the documentation requirements for crossing the boundary. This enforcement has limited the number of people able or even attempting to cross. In addition, the Abkhaz militia has increased its presence at unofficial crossing points, further discouraging Georgians from trying to cross the boundary.

DISPUTE OVER TEACHING GEORGIAN HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY IN GALI SCHOOLS

¶4. (C) There have been reports from some NGOs in Zugdidi that Georgian children in Gali are forced to cross the boundary in order to attend Georgian-language schools. However, according to UNOMIG officials, other Zugdidi-based NGOs and the Abkhaz de facto authorities, schools in Gali are free to operate in the Georgian language and most children there are learning in Georgian. The problem, according to a Sukhumi-based NGO and de facto Abkhaz "vice foreign minister" QSukhumi-based NGO and de facto Abkhaz "vice foreign minister" Maxim Gundjia, is that they are learning history and geography from Georgian textbooks. The de facto authorities and the general Abkhaz population find it unacceptable that Georgian children are learning history and geography based on a Georgian curriculum, which they maintain provides false information. Gundjia told Poloff that the de facto authorities offered to provide the Abkhaz curriculum to the Government of Georgia so that they can print the curriculum in the Georgian language, but that the Georgian government has not yet taken the Abkhaz up on this offer.

OBTAINING A PASSPORT

¶5. (C) NGOs in Zugdidi described the process of obtaining an Abkhaz passport for ethnic Georgians as a long but necessary step. Estimates of the number of Georgians who have already received a passport range from 20 to 50 percent. According to the Abkhaz government in-exile and NGOs based in Zugdidi, Georgians in Gali do not necessarily want Abkhaz passports, but feel they need one in order to vote, buy land and have

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freedom of movement within Abkhazia. According to Gundjia, a passport is only required for voting; Georgian residents in Abkhazia will be able to buy land and move freely with their resident cards. One issue which all sides raised as a concern is that Georgians cannot legally hold dual citizenship with Georgia and Abkhazia. Gundjia stated that the de facto authorities may be willing to sign an agreement to allow this -- but any agreement would lead to some form of tacit recognition of independence and is therefore highly improbable.

PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN BORDER GUARDS LEADS TO DECREASE IN CRIME

¶6. (C) According to MMOs, the presence of Russian border guards has improved the security situation, providing a buffer zone between the Georgians and Abkhaz. UNOMIG officials reported a notable reduction in crime in Gali since the arrival of the Russian guards in May. According to a UNOMIG political officer in Sukhumi, during the week of June 1, there were three crimes reported in Gali and 30 crimes reported in Zugdidi -- representing a significant reduction of crime in Gali from last year. The Russian border guards are more professional than the Abkhaz militia, and are therefore committing fewer crimes themselves, as well as preventing criminals from crossing the boundary.

¶7. (C) COMMENT. In the months immediately after the conflict in August, the humanitarian situation in Gali was dire (reftel). Criminal gangs reportedly controlled the region, teaching in Georgian language was considered illegal, and people generally lived in fear. Today the situation in Gali seems to have stabilized, with crime rates falling, the Georgian population seemingly more comfortable with the security situation, and Georgian children learning in the Georgian language. However, there are still many troubling humanitarian issues, including the lack of will among the Russians and de facto authorities to rehabilitate the Gali region, the continuing obstacles to crossing the boundary, the debate over teaching Georgian history and geography, and the continued passportization issues. The Abkhaz and Russians in Abkhazia will be able take advantage of the

departure of UNOMIG, which leaves no international body in Gali with a mandate to observe and report on the situation. The international community will need to pay close attention to what is happening in Gali in order to protect the vulnerable Georgian population. END COMMENT.

TEFFT